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Senate won't boost VA hospital spending

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Associated Press

WASHINGTON - Republicans on Tuesday beat back a Democratic attempt to provide almost \$2 billion in additional health care funding for veterans, rejecting claims that Veterans Affairs hospitals are in crisis.

The proposal was part of an \$80.6 billion emergency spending bill for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and other costs. The bill would give President Bush slightly less than the \$82 billion he sought. It is also less than the \$81.4 billion approved by the House.

The Senate's Republican leaders hoped to have the bill approved by the end of the week and ready for Bush's signature by the end of the month. But the timing of the bill has become uncertain, with Senate leaders dealing with stacks of amendments and a possible battle over immigration restrictions.

The first debate came Tuesday over a proposal by Sen. Patty Murray, D-Wash., to provide an additional \$1.98 billion for veteran's care. She said VA hospitals are underfunded and overcrowded.

"There's a train wreck coming," Murray warned.

Republicans denied the VA had such serious problems. They noted the Bush administration said the additional funding wasn't needed and that it had enough money to cope with emergencies.

Murray's proposal was defeated in a 54-46 vote, mostly along party lines.

Immigration issues posed a potentially greater obstacle for the bill's swift passage.

The House version of the bill includes measures to tighten border security, such as requiring states to verify they aren't giving drivers licenses to illegal immigrants, giving judges broader power to deport political asylum seekers suspected of being terrorists, and allowing constructions of barriers for border security without regard to environmental protections.

Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist, R-Tenn., said he has been urging senators to hold off on its immigration and border security proposals until the Senate has a chance to consider separate, more comprehensive legislation. But he could offer no assurances that the House provisions wouldn't remain in the final version of the bill worked out in conference by House and Senate negotiators.

"This whole idea of having people ... predict what's coming out of conference, it's just premature," Frist told reporters.

Among the possible immigration amendments is one from Sen. Larry Craig, R-Idaho, that would offer amnesty to some illegal immigrant farm workers. Craig is seeking assurances the Senate will consider his proposal soon if he does not offer it now as part of the Iraq spending bill.

Other amendments include proposals to raise benefits for the families of soldiers who die on duty and to prevent the Senate from reducing the number of aircraft carriers in its fleet to 11 from 12.

The bill number is H.R. 1268.

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On the Net:

For bill text: <http://thomas.loc.gov>

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